

Disintegration

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Summary:

The year is 2003 and Richie Tozier has one goal: to make it big in the city that never sleeps. Unfortunately for him, the future is uncertain, the past is a blur, and fate has other plans.

1. June, 2003 - Part 1

Author's Note:

This story takes place in the updated movieverse, between part 1 and part 2, but will likely reference events from the novel as well. I'm going to be taking bits and pieces from both canons, but I'll generally only add in canon from the novel if it doesn't contradict what happened in the movie. Hit me up on [Tumblr](#) with questions/clarification! I'm not quite sure where this will go, or how long it will be, only that I have a loose network of ideas that will, hopefully successfully, be woven together by the end.

“Our sense of worth, of well-being, even our sanity depends upon our remembering. But, alas, our sense of worth, our well-being, our sanity also depend upon our forgetting.”
- Joyce Appleby

June, 2003

“Give it to me straight, Karen.”

It was a warm, breezy day right on the cusp of summer, and Richie Tozier was sitting in a cramped office - the kind with one tiny window, tacky IKEA furniture, and a great view of an alleyway - across from his agent. Calling her an agent might be a bit of a stretch, he often thought, since when you hear that someone is an *agent*, you tend to assume they might have a client or two you'd actually recognize. Richie wasn't sure Karen had any such clients, but she was all he could afford, and even *that* was a stretch most of the time.

“SNL didn’t accept your audition tape,” she said gently, as though this hadn’t happened at least three times already. He tilted his chin up toward the ceiling and groaned at one particular crack in the plaster that had become, over the last twelve months, a regular recipient of his rejection groans. “You know, I keep telling you - you’ll have much better luck if you put in the time at UCB.”

“You know I can’t afford that shit,” he said glumly, still slumped back in his chair. She was right of course. SNL regularly sent scouts to Upright Citizens Brigade shows to find people to bring in for real auditions in front of real audiences. In order to make it to those shows, though, Richie would have to invest months and months of time and hundreds and hundreds of dollars into taking classes, and for what? A sliver of a chance? He’d rather save his cash and try the old fashioned way. “And besides, whenever I *can* afford it the classes are always full before I have a chance to sign up.”

“This city is full of people who want careers in stand up, honey,” she said, not condescendingly, but in that particular way only middle aged women from Queens said shit like ‘honey’. The way that said ‘you’re hopeless, but I’ll make you some pasta and meatballs and that’ll fix you right up.’ She would, too, though Richie had never taken her up on the offer.

“Did they at least say anything this time?” he asked, looking at her again. The last two rejections weren’t even really rejections, *per se* - he was just straight up ignored.

“Just that they normally send recruiters out to shows instead of reviewing audition tapes. You know SNL never has more than one or two spots open, Rich, it’s a tough gig,” she said, like this was news to him. “I think they hired that boy - what’s his name - the one who was on that Nickelodeon show a few years back.”

“Great, so even if I *do* take classes at UCB and go in front of every crowd in town, it won’t even matter because they’ll just hire someone who already has TV experience?” he asked, irritated. Why did they even bother saying they scouted for up and coming talent? “I smell bullshit.”

“It’s a -”

“- tough gig. Yeah, I know,” he interjected, waving his hand flippantly. “So besides paying four hundred bucks a pop to take classes at UCB, what can I do to get noticed? You know I’ve got the chops for it, Karen, you *know* I do. But I’m twenty seven years old, I need to catch a break soon or I’m fucked.”

She cleared her throat, seeming to think over very carefully what she would say next. “Well... I’ve seen some of your sets, and I think it’s just great that you’re getting booked at smaller clubs - that’s a great start,” she began, and he got the idea she was buttering him up. “But, it’s the new millennium, and the entertainment industry is changing - even comedy. Slapstick humor and impressions just aren’t what people want.”

“That’s what I *do*, though! My Voices -”

“Yeah, about that. The voices... honey, they need some work. That’s why you should take some improv classes. I think you *can* do good impressions, but sometimes the ones you do are a little...” she hesitated. “... well, a little racist.”

“Racist?!”

“Don’t look so surprised. You can’t just go around putting on Mexican accents and inventing characters that stereotype *black people*,” she said, her voice lowering to a whisper when she said ‘black people’, as though it was offensive to say even that. “Even the Irish cop one is, well, iffy.”

He dropped his head into his hands and groaned again. He thought people liked that brand of risque humor! “What the fuck am I supposed to do if I can’t do accents and shit?” he asked, genuinely at a loss. He supposed, in retrospect, that was part of the problem.

“Well, if your goal is Saturday Night Live, start with celebrity impressions and bits about politics.”

Celebrity impressions he could do - had always done, as far as he knew, but Richie Tozier was shit at keeping up with politics. The idea of spending the next year - or worse, five years - doing a George ‘dubya’ Bush Voice was unacceptable. Still, he nodded glumly. He’d have to retire so many quality Voices now. He wasn’t sure which ones were coming across as racist, but he figured if he had to *ask* which ones were, he pretty much already had his answer.

“I’ve noticed something else, too. In this post-9/11 world, people are looking for nostalgia more than ever. The comics that are doing well,

lately, get a lot of their material from their childhoods,” Karen continued. “Why don’t you try that? People go nuts for funny stories about childhood.”

Richie actually laughed at that. He’d noticed the same thing in all the sets he’d gone to since moving to the city two years ago. The only problem was that Richie could remember about as much of his childhood as he did calculus, which, it should go without saying, was not much. He admired people who could get entire sets full of some genuinely hilarious shit just from talking about the past, he really did, because as much as he tried, he always seemed to draw blanks when it came to that stuff.

Sometimes, he woke up in the middle of the night with the feeling that maybe what he’d been dreaming of had been about when he was a kid. A real young kid, middle school, or even earlier, sometimes - doing the kind of shit kids do, with people whose faces were blank and meaningless. He tried to grasp at the threads of those dreams, because they *felt* more like memories, but every single time, when he finally got a pen and paper ready, everything had already slipped through his fingertips and faded away. All he was left with was a feeling in his gut like something important had just eluded him, but even that feeling didn’t last, and soon he was asleep again.

But he couldn’t tell Karen all of that. He knew well enough that childhood memories were fleeting, fuzzy at the edges at best, and at worst, totally fabricated. He had half a mind to suggest that all those comics were just making shit up for laughs. But he didn’t. Instead, he just nodded.

“Yeah, I’ll try that.”

(does trying actually count when something is impossible?)

Richie had certain rituals for dealing with the aftereffects of meetings with Karen. First, he walked home, working himself up into some kind of existential crisis where he would question his very purpose in this world and decide, like an absolute madman, to quit comedy altogether and get a regular office job. That would definitely make his parents happy, and his dad wasn’t long for this world - throat cancer, as luck would have it.

Then, after arriving at his shitty, cramped studio apartment in Brooklyn, he'd sit out on the fire escape and have a couple of cigarettes. Nothing like a contemplative smoke on a bird shit encrusted staircase to clear the head, after all. Sometimes his neighbor's cat would join him, and he'd let himself get distracted by it. He envied that cat - it could do whatever the hell it wanted, get up to mischief all day with no responsibilities to worry about, and still come home every night to a warm place and someone to cuddle with. Even if the lady was an old bag, he didn't think he'd mind that much if he were a cat.

After his smoke break, Richie was usually ready to get back into the swing of things. So he hit a bump in the road, it wasn't the end of the world. What gave him the idea that he was special enough to make it big right away, anyway? Everyone had to deal with rejection, it was practically a requirement of living in New York City. He had friends who'd been at this longer than him with almost nothing to show for it. Almost everyone he knew was an actor or a comedian whose real job was actually waiting tables or bartending and had been for fifteen years. He wasn't doing half bad, looking at it from that perspective. At least he was getting paid for his sets, even if it was shit pay at shit clubs. He still had to bartend, of course, but it was a start.

If there was one thing Richie was good at, it was bouncing back up after being knocked down. Like a weebie wobble, he only gave the *appearance* of falling for a split second before snapping back upright. Some people called it arrogance, some called it total delusion, but he preferred to think of it as plain old resilience.

His rejection ritual continued like so: he would write a couple of new jokes down, practice a new Voice or two, have a couple of beers, another cigarette, order a pizza, eat half that pizza along with another beer, and then decide to go out for the night. After all, nothing beats the rejection blues like finding someone who would pay attention to him for an evening, laugh at his whole shtick, and maybe blow him before the night was over.

And so, at around ten that evening, he set out to find such a person.

Richie had a few favorite bars in the area, and in New York there was never a shortage of new places to go. It all depended on his mood

that night - did he want something divey, or a club? Something popular or a hole in the wall? And the biggest factor: did he feel like picking up a chick or a dude?

Tonight he settled on The Boiler Room, a divey sort of place in the East Village, just across the bridge from his place in Williamsburg. It was a gay bar, but you wouldn't know it if it weren't for the fact that it was generally a sausage fest. No fuss, no frills, just beer, pool, and halfway decent music. Not the rock he especially enjoyed, but none of that techno shit the clubs always had blaring. Richie was pretty sure if he heard Sandstorm by Darude one more time, he'd have a stroke. Just about the only thing that made clubbing enjoyable was ecstasy, and he wasn't in the mood for that tonight.

No, he was in the mood for something relaxed. Relaxed meant no dancing, no throngs of sweaty bodies to shove through to get one overpriced, watered down drink. Relaxed meant not having to be on his best behavior, which meant not being around girls. As much as he enjoyed them, girls often did not respond well to Richie's particular brand of offensive toilet humor, and his mouth always got him in trouble, especially after a few drinks. Not that he had much better luck with the guys, but the success rate was definitely different, if only by a bit.

Truthfully, Richie wasn't very good at convincing people to go home with him, and even less good at getting anyone to stick around for longer than a night. But that was fine, because he wasn't a relationship kind of guy and never had been.

(or at least, he couldn't recall a time when he was)

It was strange, but whenever Richie entered a club or bar, he always half expected to be stopped at the door and turned away on the grounds of being a total loser. He'd spent his high school years in Portland not getting invited to parties (most weekends he ended up playing Dungeons & Dragons with a couple of other nerds, but they took it way too seriously), and the first year of college in Boston getting outright kicked out of parties for 'ruining the vibe' with his coke bottle glasses and inability to control the volume of his voice when drunk. Eventually, he traded in his glasses for contacts and learned that the best way to get invited to parties (and the best way

to chill the fuck out) was to bring good weed with him.

Still, the leftover dregs of his experiences as a social outcast still caused him to pause on the threshold of entering someplace cool. He'd wait, just for a moment, before remembering that there was no longer a reason for anyone to look twice at him. He was just a scrawny dude with unruly dark hair, the same as half the guys in the city and at least three quarters of the guys in Brooklyn alone. He didn't stand out, not anymore, for better or worse (at least until he opened his mouth). Sure, he'd spent most of his income since 1996 on his damn contacts, but being able to avoid the Harry Potter comparisons that would have started the very next year made it *completely* worthwhile. He also got a lot more numbers *sans* glasses, which said a lot about his old success rate once you took into account he still didn't get that many numbers.

Thus, he strode into the bar normally and sat down, as if he'd always been a regular guy and not the kind of person who would memorize the Periodic Table for no other reason than classroom boredom.

The place wasn't too busy yet, as it was still rather early. New York didn't really come alive until the a.m., so he had some time to get a little drunk before he had to start trying to charm the pants off of somebody.

Two beers later, Richie was deep in thought about the possibility of using his failed Dungeons & Dragons campaigns as material for a 'nostalgia' set, like Karen wanted. The problem was, it wasn't very *funny* material. But it was all he could come up with at the moment.

He left his seat at the bar to take a piss, and only when he came back from the bathroom did he notice the place was starting to fill up. The Boiler Room attracted a variety of guys - twinks, bears, straight acting college dudes just figuring themselves out, those who were out to cruise, and those who weren't. The place was dark, but it wasn't seedy, though some of the more *secluded* seating areas might suggest otherwise. Mostly it was just comfortable, though, a no pressure, judgement free atmosphere.

Trying to keep focused (he was, after all, five beers in if he counted the ones he had at home), he started to scan the room for someone he

could potentially talk to. He always felt skeevy doing this, like a hawk circling around looking for prey, but what other option was there?

It didn't take long for his gaze to settle on someone.

The boy was leaning against a wall not too far away from where Richie was standing, looking out of place, and not in the way he was dressed or anything, but in the way he carried himself - like he wasn't sure he should be there. Something about the nervous types always seemed to catch Richie's attention, and he could never figure out why. And this guy looked *nervous*, if only because his space was being invaded by a rather imposing, hairy fellow. It was almost comical, the way they looked from where Richie stood - like a wolf cornering a rabbit.

Richie could tell the boy was trying to sidestep out of the situation, but the dude was having none of it. He drunkenly braced himself against the wall with one hand, leaning in and effectively trapping the boy. The room was dimly lit, but Richie could see distinctly that he was shaking his head, could see his shoulders tense up - it was obvious this dude was taking his attempt at cruising too far, already too drunk to take a hint.

The smart choice would be to move on. Richie was about half the size of this guy, not in height but in mass, where it really mattered, and certainly couldn't hope to take him on should things go south. But something stopped him from walking away, and it wasn't his natural chivalry. It was as if the kid was sending out distress signals which only Richie could pick up; no one else in the vicinity paid the two of them any mind, but Richie couldn't look away.

Suddenly his feet were moving on their own, weaving him seamlessly between patrons from point A to point B. An invisible force propelled him forward, like he was on the wrong end of some kid's Nintendo joystick, and soon he was close enough to catch what they were saying over the drone of jukebox tunes.

"C'mon, lemme buy you a drink," the big guy said, voice dry and gruff from drinking.

“No thank you, I really don’t-”

The guy moved in a bit more. “Just one,” he said, in a way that suggested after the ‘one’ was accepted, he would demand *just one more*, and then another, and so on, as men so often do, regardless of their sexual proclivities. Wasn’t Richie planning on playing the same sort of game tonight? *We’re all a bunch of animals looking for prey*, he thought wryly.

The kid tried to sidestep again, but was blocked. “I should get going...”

“Little thing like you shouldn’t be alone inna place like this, perverts everywhere y’know.”

At this, Richie laughed out loud. Too loudly. It was enough to force the guy to stand up straight and turn toward him, revealing just how large he was.

“What’d you say?”

He had to have been a football player at some point, before becoming a washed up drunk cruising in bars for dudes ten years too young for him. Richie swallowed thickly, forcing his most shit-eating grin onto his face.

“Just, seems to me he’s trying to get the fuck away from you and yet here you are talking about *other* perverts,” he said, standing tall despite something about this situation making his head swim. Too many beers, he assumed, though five over a few hours was usually nothing to him. “Pretty embarrassing, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t. Walk away, fucker.”

Richie almost balked at that, but couldn’t say why exactly.

(hey fuckface, I’ll give ya a head start if you and your faggot friend want to start running)

“I said walk away. We’re busy here,” the guy repeated, and gave Richie a light shove to the shoulder. Not enough to suggest wanting to actually fight, but enough to send the message that he would if it

came to that.

Richie dared, right then, to look at the kid he was inexplicably trying to rescue, and his breath momentarily caught in his throat. He was met with large, round eyes. They were a warm brown, framed with long lashes, and riddled with an anxiety that was so strangely familiar it made Richie shudder.

He made himself look away.

“Listen,” he said to the bigger guy, his mouth suddenly dry. “Why don’t you walk away and try this tactic somewhere else, because it’s clearly not working here.” He paused for a beat - *don’t say it, please God don’t* - “Who knows, maybe someone in here is actually *into* gorilla breath and beer bellies! Niche interest, but you never know.” He winced. *God damn it.*

“Alright, you annoying piece of shit,” the guy began, taking a step toward Richie, who started bracing himself for impact. Then he suddenly rounded on the kid, who promptly flattened himself against the wall as though he could disappear through it. “Tell this guy we’re busy here! I’m buying you a drink, right?”

The kid looked from him, then to Richie, then back, and Richie thought for sure he would concede and side with this asshole just to save his own skin. But then he said, with surprising firmness for someone who was visibly shaking, “No, I already said no.”

Homeboy looked momentarily shocked, then shot a glare at Richie. Just when Richie was about to start in with a Voice (probably Buford Kissdrivel, a new one he’d been crafting and which he didn’t consider very offensive, regardless of what Karen said), the guy stepped off with a huff. “Fine. There’re twenty other twinks in this place who’ll have a drink *and* suck me off in the bathroom. So fuck this.”

“Good luck with that!” Richie called out, heart racing, as the guy stormed off, shoving past a few other bar patrons on his way. He was glad the music was loud enough now to drown him out, because he didn’t want the guy decide to turn around and show him what’s what.

As he turned back, he worried for a moment that the kid would be

gone, but he was still there, pressed hard against the wall. He looked weirded out, like something the guy just said really got to him. With the aim of catching his attention, Richie easily slid back into acting casual and pretended to wipe a tear from his eye as he lamented, “I just realized I never got his name. Guess I’ll be writing up a missed connections post on Craigslist later.”

He grinned expectantly, but was met only with a look of pure skepticism.

“Well...” he said slowly, grin faltering as he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “I was actually just over here to hit on that guy, but it obviously backfired, so...”

“Really?” *He speaks!*

Jeez, was this kid really that gullible? “I mean, no, of course not. Not my type,” Richie replied, smiling in what he hoped was a very obvious but not at all skeevy way.

“I didn’t expect that to happen, so I didn’t know what to do about it,” the boy said, almost defensively, as he finally peeled off the wall a bit.

“You didn’t expect *that*?” Richie asked, surprised. “That kind of shit happens *all the time* at places like this. Fuck, in any bar in the world, really. Honestly I’ve seen worse.”

The boy frowned and blinked once. Richie watched, as if in slow motion, the flutter of his eyelashes. “Oh. Well, thanks anyway. I should get going.”

Before Richie realized what was happening, he’d already started walking away. “Whoa! Whoa there,” he half-shouted over the music, scrambling to cut him off before he could escape. *That’s probably not the right word to use right now, Jay-sus.* “It’s not even midnight! The party’s just getting started!”

He waved a hand around at the bar, and it was true that it had gotten more crowded since their little encounter first started. At this point, the pool tables were all being used, the seating areas were full, and

the bar itself was all but hidden behind a mess of guys clamoring for drinks. Now that they were closer to the center of the room where the lighting was a bit brighter, Richie could see that his focus of tonight was even cuter than he previously thought. He looked simultaneously too young and too old to be in this place - his face soft and smooth with a light smattering of freckles across his nose, and his clothing all hard lines, neatly pressed and too business casual for a dump like this (no offense to The Boiler Room). He was regarding Richie with uncertainty, but he stopped walking just the same.

“Stay,” Richie said, unable to keep the pleading tone out of his voice. “Let me buy you a drink.”

The kid recoiled at that, nose wrinkling like he just caught a whiff of something vile. “God, is that what that whole thing was about? You were just trying to get him to leave so you could swoop in and do the same thing?” he said, the words tumbling out of his mouth faster than Richie could keep up with. This sudden shift in demeanor gave Richie whiplash - no longer stiff and nervous, his hand gestures were animated and his face was expressive. Defiant. Richie wanted to reach out and... do what, exactly?

(cute cute cute!)

“No! Not... well when you say it like that, it sounds bad,” he joked, putting on (what he thought was) his most charming smile as heat rose in his cheeks. How was it that he was twenty seven *fucking* years old and suddenly felt like he was an awkward teen again? “Listen, I just don’t want you leaving here with the wrong idea about this place. That guy? He’s just some goon - probably in from Jersey looking to score. That’s not what this place is about.” *Well, sort of.* “We’re a hospitable folk here at The Boiler Room, the East Village’s *premiere* spot for guys who are clinging too fiercely to their precious, *precious* masculinity to be caught dead in a nightclub drenched in sweat and glitter.”

Whether Richie lumped himself in with that assessment really depended on the day. Regardless, the comment achieved its goal - the boy was smiling, still unsure, and a blush was creeping into his cheeks. Had Richie accidentally called him out? Was he, too, afraid of

sweat and glitter? It wouldn't surprise Richie if he was - he seemed pretty tightly wound.

Richie waved dramatically toward the bar, dipping down into the faintest ghost of a bow, grinning to himself when his new friend obliged.

They found a small open space near the far corner of the bar, but it was a tight squeeze. In this proximity, pressed shoulder to shoulder by bigger bodies on either side of them, Richie felt his heart rate spike. "What do you want?" he shouted over the noise. Both the music and the murmur of voices seemed amplified now that they were this close to the action.

"What? Oh - I don't really know what they have," the boy replied, his cheeks reddening again.

"Just tell me what you like, they'll be able to make it! Don't worry about the cost!" Richie said, wondering vaguely how much money he actually had in his pocket.

The kid looked at him, almost like he was embarrassed, and started worrying his bottom lip with his teeth.

"Don't tell me this is your first time ordering a drink!" Richie joked, but as soon as he said it he realized it probably wasn't a joke. "Wait, you *are* twenty one right?"

"I'm twenty six!" he shot back, looking somewhat appalled. "And I - I just don't really, I've never really..."

Richie nodded. A twenty six year old who didn't drink. Christ. There was a first time for everything, right? He turned and waved to the bartender with a flourish, shouting in his best English accent, "Oy barkeep!! I've got a fit lad ovah here who's nevah 'ad a drink in 'is loife! Get him a pint right quick then!"

"What the fuck are you *doing*?" the kid asked, and Richie looked to see how red he was now. The answer: beet red. It was a wonder that he didn't up and leave at that moment. The fact that he didn't told Richie everything he needed to know about how this night would go.

The bartender - whose name, Richie vaguely recalled, was Sam - reluctantly came over to them. "Hey kid, you know I hate that shit. I see you in here twice a month and it's always with some shitty accent," he said, placing two glasses in front of them.

"I'm offended, sir."

"What'll it be?"

"For me, whatever you've got on tap that isn't Blue Moon. For him..." Richie paused, carefully regarding his companion. He didn't seem like the type who would like beer. He also didn't seem like he would want anything particularly extravagant. He seemed too nervous to have anything in a martini glass without spilling. No, he needed something unassuming, something that would take the edge off without tasting overly alcoholic. "How about just a vodka cranberry. Keeping it simple tonight, y'know?"

"Right. That'll be fifteen."

"They rob you blind here," Richie said once the bartender turned away, laughing nervously as he took out his wallet. Careful not to let the kid see how much money he actually had, he pulled out a twenty and all but slammed it down onto the bar. When the bartender came back with their drinks, he slid the bill over with one hand and shot him a finger gun with the other. "Keep the change, mate."

Gotta make a good impression. Richie knew that if you got stingy with the tip, people noticed. Nine times out of ten, if he offered to pay and then tipped like shit, the girl (or guy, but it seemed girls noticed these things more) never called him again. So he learned to just suck it up and deal with his abject poverty another day.

It wasn't until they had their drinks and found a space to stand - ironically near the spot where this all started - that Richie realized he hadn't even introduced himself yet.

"By the way, I'm -" he paused a beat. "Rich." He wasn't sure what made him drop the 'ie', it wasn't as though he really felt like he'd outgrown Richie, *per se*. Not *quite* yet, anyway. He just figured Rich sounded more mature, and he needed all the maturity he could get

after the retrospectively embarrassing Voice stunt he pulled with the bartender. "And you are?"

"Oh, yeah. My name's Eddie."

Their eyes met, and Richie felt a sharp ache in his chest.

What the fuck has gotten into me tonight? he thought, watching him - Eddie - over the rim of his beer glass. He was smiling softly, eyes downcast now as he carefully stirred his drink with the straw. A few wisps of hair fell across his forehead.

Richie reached up to brush his own hair out of his face - no, that wasn't it at all. He had instinctively reached up, sure, *but it was to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose*. Glasses that weren't there and hadn't been in years.

2. January, 1990

Summary for the Chapter:

The year is 1990 and Eddie Kaspbrak can't handle his feelings.

Notes for the Chapter:

So this fic - as my love letter to the novel, the movie, and Reddie - is going to jump back and forth between the past and the "present". I hope it won't become confusing, but I feel it's important to establish context in bits and pieces. So, this chapter takes place about six months after the events of the first IT encounter. Going forward, all 90's chapters will be from Eddie's POV and all 2000's chapters will be from Richie's POV.

Some continuity adjustments that will come up include, but are not limited to: Mike's parents being alive because I hate that the movie took away the best father/son relationship in the novel, the leper being the novel's leper (both as the real hobo and Pennywise's incarnation of it) because it's important to Eddie's character arc, Belch and Vic being alive as they are in the film because why not, and Henry Bowers having the same fate he had in the novel since his movie departure was... ambiguous at best (though Eddie's rumor-fueled "knowledge" of what happened is a miniseries Easter egg).

January, 1990

"Hey, what did you guys get for number five?" Eddie asked, tapping the eraser end of his pencil against his forehead.

He was sitting cross legged on the floor of Richie's bedroom, his back propped up against the bedframe. Stan was sitting a couple of feet

away, hunched over and focusing intently on his Algebra I homework, Mike was leaning against Richie's dresser doing the same thing, and Richie was lying on his bed actively *not* participating in their homework session. Instead, he was tossing a bouncy ball - the kind you get from supermarket vending machines for a quarter - against the wall.

"I got that x is seven," Mike replied, looking up from his own homework. He wasn't in Eddie's class, but all the 8th grade math teachers gave the same assignments, so they usually did their homework together.

thump, thump, thump

"But that doesn't make sense, wouldn't it have to be an even number? Because - oh, hold on, I get what I did wrong..."

thump, thump

Eddie caught Mike's eye from across the room and then they both looked at Stan. He had stopped writing, but didn't look up. Eddie figured Mike could feel the irritation radiating off of Stan's body just like he could.

"Did you get x equals four for the first one?" Mike asked, and Eddie knew he didn't actually need confirmation. He was just trying to cut through the tension.

thump

"Yeah, I-"

thump

"*Fuck, Richie, will you stop?*" Stan suddenly snapped, slamming his notebook against his lap. "If you hit the wall one more time I'm going to throw that stupid thing out the window."

"Do it, I have like ten more of them in my yo-yo drawer," Richie said nonchalantly, and grinned at Stan as he threw the bouncy ball against the wall one last time.

Stan inhaled deeply, but didn't follow through on his threat, as Eddie knew he wouldn't. "Grow up sometime, will you?"

"No thanks," Richie said, sitting up. "Well, I'm bored as shit. We could be doing literally *anything* else right now, just saying. It's Saturday."

"You could do your homework too, you know," Eddie said, tilting his head back to look up at Richie.

"I did it already. Or I lost it. One of the two," Richie replied flippantly, now lightly tossing the ball in the air rather than throwing it against anything, undoubtedly for Stan's sake, though he'd never admit it. "Or both? Who knows."

"How do you *not* know?" Stan scoffed. He kept a detailed agenda for all his work in a pocket-sized daily planner, and all his notebooks were perfectly organized, so Eddie knew there was no way Stan could fully comprehend how disorganized Richie was, even after knowing each other for years. Eddie didn't mind it so much - it was sort of charming, in a weird way.

And anyway, it didn't really matter that Richie didn't know where his work was, because even if Richie *did* lose it, Eddie knew he could easily do the problems in the first five minutes of class on Monday. Maybe that was the real reason Stan was irritated - he actually enjoyed math, but had to work hard to learn the skills for it, whereas Richie couldn't care less and got A's anyway.

"You wanna go through my backpack for me and organize my papers, Stanley, go right ahead, I won't stop you," Richie said. "Be warned though, there's probably a sandwich or two from before Christmas break in there somewhere."

"That's disgusting," Eddie said, looking at Richie's bag, which was lying by the door, as though it were a pile of radioactive waste. It might as well be, what with all the bacteria that was surely multiplying as they spoke.

"Better go get your hazmat suit, Eds," Richie joked, reaching over to ruffle Eddie's hair.

Eddie pulled away, looking down to hide the color in his cheeks. “Don’t call me that,” he muttered, patting his hair back into place. “Asshole.”

“Seriously though, can you guys put this shit away and do it tomorrow night like everyone else in the world?” Richie was on his knees now, the bouncy ball having been abandoned somewhere in his bedsheets. “I got one of those Nintendo systems for Christmas, so we can play a game. I have Mario!”

Eddie and Mike both looked at Stan for approval. He frowned. “Only two people can play Mario.”

“Well, you can go first, my stubborn but *delightful* friend,” Richie said, nearly kicking Eddie in the head as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed. “We can call Big Bill and Haystack and make it a party.”

Stan sighed, gave them a moment or two of suspense, and then smiled warmly. “Alright fine.”

“You won’t regret this decision, Stan the Man,” Richie said, leaping off of the bed. Eddie scrambled to his feet, followed by Mike and Stan, and Richie led the way downstairs. Mike veered off into the kitchen to call Bill and Ben, and the rest made themselves at home in the living room

As usual, Richie’s parents were out. Eddie envied that - his own mom hardly ever left the house, and when she did, she always made him go with her rather than leave him home alone. The Toziers were a different story. Richie’s dad worked a lot, even on weekends most of the time, and Richie’s mom... Eddie wasn’t quite sure *what* she did, because every time he asked, Richie gave him a different story. Stan said she was a drinker, but although he didn’t know much of anything about being drunk, Eddie thought she seemed perfectly nice every time he talked to her.

Richie’s parents were the reason they all preferred to hang out at Richie’s house, but Eddie knew he felt lonely a lot. He never explicitly said so, but little things suggested it, like the way Richie avoided going home if he knew his parents were gone and no one

was available to come over, and the way he made fun of Stan and Mike for spending a lot of time with their families. It wasn't really that he thought they were lame, it was jealousy.

Eddie thought about these things as he watched Richie set up his Nintendo, and wondered if that sort of expensive gift was supposed to make up for leaving him by himself so much.

"Alright we've got Mario and Duck Hunt," Richie said, holding up the grey NES Zapper gun and pulling the trigger a couple of times. "I also have Mega Man and The Legend of Zelda. Thoughts?"

"You don't have Tetris?" Stan asked without looking up from the Zelda cartridge in his hand.

Richie rolled his eyes. "Why the fuck would I have *Tetris*, Stan? That game is for losers."

"Newsflash, *we're* losers."

"Well, it's boring. There's no *fighting*!"

"It's actually pretty challenging. Is *that* why you don't like it?" Stan asked, smirking.

Richie pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Challenging?! You try beating the Yellow Devil with *perfectly* timed jumps and almost no chances to hit the fucker without dying five hundred times, and *then* come talk to me about challenging."

"I heard from the news that Tetris gets burned into your TV screen if you play it too long," Eddie interjected. "My mom said that if games like that could do that to a machine, they probably mess with your eyes too."

Richie gestured to him. "See? Tetris will give you eye cancer, Stanley."

"Wait, really?" Eddie exclaimed, horrified. "Is that just Tetris or is it all video games? Arcade games too? I thought she just meant I'd need glasses if I played!"

“Right, that’s what I meant,” Richie said, taking a seat beside Eddie on the sofa. Eddie noticed that he sat on the middle cushion, despite the other side being empty too. “Look what you’re doing, Stan. You’re getting Eds all worked up!”

“That was you!”

“And anyway, are you *trying* to make me go blind, Stanley? My eyes can’t afford to get any worse.”

“Alright, I get it - you don’t like Tetris.”

“Honestly the last thing I need in my life is a pair of even thicker glasses.”

“I said I get it.”

“And if I had to get thicker glasses because I spent four hours watching you and Haystack essentially *playing with blocks* - because we all know he’d shit his pants over a game like that if he hasn’t already - I would -”

“I get it!”

Richie shot a wink at Eddie, as he always did when his dramatics paid off. Eddie bit his lip to keep his grin under control.

At this point, Mike came back into the room to inform them that Bill was on his way over, but Ben had to run errands with his mom that afternoon.

He paused at the coffee table and reached in front of Stan to pick up a couple of cartridges. “I’ve never even heard of these games.”

“That’s ‘cause you live in the past too much, Hanlon. This is basically all I’ve been doing since Christmas.”

“We can play Mario until Bill gets here,” Eddie suggested, figuring that was neutral ground. Bill would know which game to play, and whatever he picked wouldn’t be argued against.

And so they did, though there was really only enough time for Richie

to give Mike a tutorial on how to use the controls before Bill arrived.

“S-so what’re we p-playing?” Bill asked as he took his jacket and boots off.

“Your choice, Billy. I have Mario, Duck Hunt, Mega Man, and The Legend of Zelda,” Richie said, not moving from his spot on the couch, where he had his arm thrown across the back cushion like he was the coolest person in the room. And maybe he was, at least before Bill arrived. “No Tetris, though, which is apparently a fucking *crime*.”

Stan rolled his eyes.

“How about Duck Hu-hunt. I w-want to try out the Z-zapper.”

They were able to switch between the two games easily, as Duck Hunt was on the same cartridge as Mario. Eddie didn’t understand *why*, since Duck Hunt didn’t appear to have anything to do with Mario. It involved shooting at the TV screen using the gun instead of a controller and trying to hit ducks that flew across the screen, but there were no mushrooms or castles involved. And there were *definitely* no man eating flowers coming out of sewer pipes. Those things gave him the creeps, though Eddie wasn’t about to say anything to the guys about it. He much preferred to watch Duck Hunt than Mario, though, that was for sure.

Mike decided to sit Duck Hunt out - he wasn’t into killing animals, even if it was just a game. He sat on the far end of the couch, on the other side of Richie, and the three of them watched Bill and Stan, who were both on the floor close to the TV, take turns with the game. The number of ducks and the speed at which they flew increased with every round, but neither of them were good enough to advance very far.

Eddie leaned back and brought his knees up so that his feet were on the couch, prepared to settle in for an afternoon of this. It wasn’t long before Richie started egging the other boys on, alternating between heckling them like they were baseball players coming up to bat and providing radio-style commentary every time they messed up. Sometimes, though, he would settle back and start absentmindedly toying with the hair at the nape of Eddie’s neck, and not in a joking

way, or at least... not in a way that made Eddie want to pull away.

(Eddie, what are you looking for?)

“This dog is evil!” Stan shouted as he got his fourth game over in a row, the hunting dog yet again rising from the grass to laugh at his failure. Richie pulled his hand away before Stan could turn around and see. “I’m not sure what’s worse, the dog mocking me or *you* mocking me.”

“How dare you compare me to that dog. I’m clearly the more annoying one,” Richie said as though he took real offense to that. “I’m hurt, Stanley.”

“Good to know you’re setting the bar high for yourself,” Stan said, turning back around to restart the game.

Richie and Eddie exchanged a look and tried to suppress their laughter. Stan was always so meticulous and controlled, so watching him lose his cool over games was a guaranteed good time. He tended to be very competitive, and was kind of a sore loser, but only because he took games *very* seriously. It only got *really* bad when they played the board game Risk, because that was just about the most serious game any of them owned.

“I’m done, this is a stupid game,” Stan said after his next game over, his tone overly calm for how flushed his face was. He passed the gun off to Bill before promptly standing up to smooth out the wrinkles in his slacks, as though doing so would prove he wasn’t taking the loss personally.

“You know who’d be g-good at this game?” Bill said suddenly. “B-Beverly.”

At first, no one said anything. For a split second, Eddie didn’t even know who Bill was talking about. Then, realization hit and he felt a pang of guilt run through him. He figured he must just be tired, or hungry, or any number of things that could cause his brain not to function properly. It was probably from watching video games - his mom *did* warn him. But...

How could he possibly have forgotten about Beverly, even for a moment?

She moved right at the beginning of the school year. Her dad had died suddenly - Eddie couldn't recall from what - so she had to go live with her aunt in Portland. She said she'd write, and call, but Eddie hadn't heard from her, and he never thought to ask any of the other guys if they had. All he knew was that Bill and Ben both took it pretty hard for a while. Ben even stopped hanging out with them as much for two whole months, and Bill reacted by talking about her nonstop for *weeks* after she left.

It occurred to Eddie, then, that until now he actually hadn't heard Bill mention her since... Halloween? Maybe even before that.

"Sh-she was always g-good a-at hitting targets," Bill said, and he looked kind of confused, like he too was surprised he brought her up. "Like wh-when she hit Henry B-b-bowers right on the head with a rock."

"Oh man, that was crazy," Mike said, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "I can't believe that was the first time I really hung out with you guys... it seems like so long ago."

Richie chuckled. "Bowers practically pissed himself when we all stood up to him, I bet he ran home crying to his..." he paused, face falling. "... to his dad."

They all exchanged a look. Eddie pulled his knees further against his chest, one hand gripping his other wrist tightly. Henry Bowers, it turned out, was the one responsible for those kids going missing over the summer. No one was sure how true that was, or how many of them he could truly take credit for, but things certainly looked bad for him. His father's body was discovered after he failed to show up to work for two days in a row - he'd bled out from his neck, still wearing his policeman's uniform. Henry was found a day or so later, wandering around in the Barrens, covered in sewer muck. Eddie heard - from rumors at school and around town - that he was talking gibberish about the sewer and dead kids, and although they apparently never found any bodies, they just took Henry's babbling as a confession and ran with it.

Some people said that the cops were just trying to pin the blame on someone, since the missing kids case was getting out of hand. Others said that they *framed* Henry to make sure he went away forever, on account of his dad being on the force. Either way, no more kids went missing.

There were also whispers around town that when they found Henry, his hair had turned *white*. Eddie wasn't sure if that was true, since his trial wasn't open to the public and was over quickly. But it *was* true that Henry wasn't sent to jail, but to Juniper Hill, a state mental institution.

It was strange. In some ways, Eddie almost felt *bad* for Henry Bowers. It was an insane thought, because if he killed kids over the summer, he might even have been responsible for Bill's brother, Georgie. He'd never, *ever* tell Bill, or even Richie, that he felt even an ounce of sympathy for such a horrible, psychotic bully. But still... something felt *off* about the whole story.

(*you think this is funny!?*)

Later, after the others had gone home, Eddie and Richie were back in his bedroom reading comic books. Eddie almost always stayed behind, and there were a few reasons for this. The first was obvious enough: he didn't want to go home. Home meant being around his mom. It meant getting babied and made to feel bad about himself and his feelings. It meant having to take pills he didn't want to take, because for some inexplicable reason they did not feel as necessary now. It meant having to hear her talk badly about his friends and their families, and feeling guilty about being too afraid to tell her to stop. It meant having to listen to her complain, in particular, about Richie - his language, his attitude, that he was too physical, too comfortable, that she thought he smoked, would get Eddie sick...

The second reason was that Richie's father was very particular about how his house was kept, and Richie was not very good at picking up after himself. Eddie liked to make sure that there was no evidence any of them were in the living room, because he liked knowing he was helping Richie avoid 'a verbal sparring match with his old man', as he would say. It was a silly type of adrenaline rush, pushing the limits of how long the other guys could stay and how quickly they

could clean up and rush upstairs before they heard the garage door opening.

The third, and perhaps the most important reason, was that Richie acted differently when it was just the two of them. It wouldn't be that noticeable to any outsiders looking in, but to Eddie it often felt like he knew a side of Richie that no one else did. When it was just them, Richie was more apt to talk about his goals and his future, more willing to admit when he was struggling with something, and less likely to interrupt a comfortable silence with crude jokes. They had moments like that in the past - like the time Richie said he wanted to be a ventriloquist and Eddie had to bite his tongue about Richie not being very good at it - but they seemed more frequent since the school year started.

At the moment, they were lying in Richie's bed reading the latest issue of *Uncanny X-Men*, called 'Lady Mandarin'. Eddie wasn't particularly interested in it, but it was Richie's favorite series, so he rested his cheek against the other boy's shoulder and listened attentively as he read aloud, making up different Voices for every character.

Downstairs, he could hear faint footsteps and the clanging of pots and pans. It smelled like Mrs. Tozier was making spaghetti, which Richie would surely make a joke about sooner or later. The television could be heard only as a gentle hum from downstairs, and Eddie imagined Mr. Tozier must be watching the news, because that's what dads always did in sitcoms. The sky outside was starting to turn a bit orange, which meant he'd have to go home soon.

"Hey Richie?" he said, interrupting the comic book reading. Richie glanced down, and Eddie could feel the line of his jaw rest against the top of his head.

"If you're about to ask if you can stay for dinner, the answer should be obvious," he said. "Who am I to deny my Eddie his spaghetti?"

Eddie swatted his hand away before he had the chance to pinch his cheek. "No. That's not what I was going to ask. I wanted to tell you something."

“Oh yeah?”

“Today, when Bill mentioned Beverly...” he began, sitting up straight so he could see Richie’s face. “For a second I... I thought I forgot who she was. Just for a second. Is there something wrong with my brain? Like, how early onset is early onset dementia?”

“I’m pretty sure you have to be at least forty for that, Eds.”

“Then why? I swear Richie, it took a second for it to even click that I knew her name, or to remember her face!” he said, and he could hear himself getting worked up, his voice pitching as he began to talk too fast. “It’s like my brain just broke, and I thought maybe it was from the video games frying it like my mom said they would but I’m not entirely sure that even happens for real so I think that it’s just gotta be that I’m a shitty fucking friend!” He paused to take a much needed breath. “Am I a shitty friend?”

“Fuck no, you’re an awesome friend. A little annoying, though, when you talk a mile a minute like that about dumb shit your mom’s told you.”

“I’m being serious!”

“So am I!” Richie said, sitting up straighter. “Look, if I’m being totally fucking honest... the same thing kind of happened to me.”

“Really?” Eddie thought he might cry from relief.

“Yeah, I mean... fuck, you barely knew her for a couple of months. I bummed smokes off her by the dumpster behind the school all through last year, and went to the movies with her, and hung out in the Barrens without all you guys just to smoke and shoot the shit.”

“You did?” Eddie asked, and felt strangely jealous. Did Richie have something going with Beverly? Did *everyone*?

“Well, yeah, you *never* just sit with me while I smoke without going on *and on* about cancer and rotting teeth and secondhand inhalation and shit. She was the only one who would join me.”

“Okay well then fuck me for not wanting you to *die*, I guess.”

“Look, my point was that I spent a lot more time with her than you did, and for a second I couldn’t match her face with her name either,” Richie said, shrugging. “It’s just time passing by, Eds. People fade. We haven’t seen or heard from her in months. She was supposed to send us her new phone number and address when she knew them, so it’s her own fucking fault for not keeping in contact. She probably has tons of new friends in Portland, anyway, since she was always too cool for Derry.”

Eddie could tell Richie was trying to speak lightly, but the resentment was evident on his face before he looked down, sniffing as he thumbed back through the X-Men issue to mark the spot where they left off. “Sure wish I still had someone to smoke with, though,” he said after a moment, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Eddie’s stomach flipped upside down. “I’ll sit with you, and I won’t complain,” he said, shifting over so that he could press his forehead against Richie’s shoulder. He threw one arm around the taller boy’s neck, surprised by his own assertiveness. “So long as you don’t blow the smoke in my face on purpose.”

“My dear I would never *dream* of it,” Richie replied in a bad old Hollywood accent, tossing the comic book aside with a flourish. He grabbed Eddie by the shoulders, catching him off guard as he shoved him down into the mattress. “Except I think you’re pretty cute when you’re peeved off, so...”

He tried to pinch Eddie’s cheek again, and Eddie’s attempt to push him away quickly turned into a very unfair wrestling match. Eddie couldn’t sit up at all, as Richie’s hands were planted firmly on top of his shoulders, so all he could do was try to wriggle free and smack Richie upside the head while the other boy blew warm air into his face to imitate exhaling second hand smoke.

“Stop it! You’re getting spit on me and your breath reeks!” he whined, hitting harder despite his obvious laughter.

“It does not!”

“Yes it does, it smells like salt and vinegar chips you shithead!” Eddie shouted, laughing harder now, though it was starting to get painful.

He almost smacked Richie's glasses off of his face by accident.

"You know you love it, Eds!" Richie taunted, but he stopped blowing air all the same.

Then their eyes met, and for an insane, impossible moment, Eddie could have sworn that Richie was going to kiss him. His face was too close, they had both stopped laughing, and time seemed to slow to a stop. Suddenly, all Eddie could think of was his mother scoffing at the 'couple of queers' they saw on the street the last time they were in Bangor, of Henry Bowers and Belch Huggins shouting *faggot* and *girly boy* at him, of feeling the hardness in Patrick Hockstetter's pants as he pinned Eddie's arms back to give Henry a better angle for punching, and of running, *running* in a desperate attempt to escape from diseased hands grabbing for him.

(I'll do it for free, come back anytime!)

And just like that, time sped up and the game was over. He felt the air catch in his throat, which felt horribly tight all of a sudden. He gave Richie a hard shove and angrily shouted, even as he struggled to breathe normally, "Seriously, Richie - get *off!* You're making me have an asthma attack!"

"Come on, you never get those around me," the other boy said, but still conceded and withdrew.

Eddie knew it was unfair to play the asthma card knowing full well it would stop Richie in his tracks no matter what, but he didn't think he could handle another moment of having Richie on top of him like that. His whole body felt hot as he sat up to dig his inhaler out of his fanny pack, and he purposely looked away from Richie when he used it. Then, as his breathing stabilized, he moved closer to the edge of the bed, still avoiding Richie's eyes.

"I... I should get home now, or my mom's going to have a bird."

(it won't do you any good to run, Eddie)

"Aw, but the spaghetti though!" Richie said, laughing, though it was a strange laugh, and when Eddie finally glanced back at him he saw

that his face was also flushed. His dark hair was ridiculously disheveled and he had a big smudge on the left lens of his glasses, and Eddie's heart was pounding in his chest in a way that was incredibly worrisome. *Is this what a heart attack feels like?*

"Sorry, I just need to be back before dark," he said hurriedly, jumping up to start gathering the homework he abandoned on the floor hours earlier.

Just before he left, standing the doorway of Richie's bedroom, he looked back. Richie was sitting on the edge of his bed, and Eddie could see the hurt written on his face even as he waved goodbye.

(won't do you any good to run)

3. June, 2003 - Part 2

Summary for the Chapter:

In 2003, two people who have just met start to feel as though they've known each other for their entire lives.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this took ten times longer than anticipated to get up. I fell down the RP rabbit hole right after starting this chapter, and failed to return to it until today! It's a lot longer than I thought it would be. Hopefully it's worth it!

June, 2003

He was cute, that was for sure. The sort of innocence that radiated off of him was unfamiliar to Richie, as most of the people in his life were foul mouthed and devious, like he was. Eddie was different, though, and Richie was drawn to that, just as he was drawn to Buddy Holly and X-Men, campy horror flicks and ice cream cones. That indescribable feeling of *comfort* was not something Richie had come across often during his time in New York, especially not in another human being. He didn't know what triggered it, only that he wanted to hold onto it for as long as possible.

There was a small window of opportunity, though. Best case scenario, he had until the bar closed, but the worst case scenario was that he had only until Eddie finished his drink to lay on the charm. Either way, he needed to use his time wisely. Any mistake could cause the illusion to break, and Eddie would see what a loser he really was and disappear into the night. Unless he got a phone number, and soon, Richie would end up like the prince in Cinderella, going door to door to every apartment in the entire city looking for this boy, with nothing to go on besides a first name and description.

But, he was getting ahead of himself, and the clock was ticking.

“So what’s your deal anyway?” he asked, shifting slightly closer to Eddie to let a few people squeeze by. Eddie looked up, confused, his drink half finished in his hand. “I mean with the whole alcohol thing. You had no idea what you were doing back at the bar.”

Eddie shrugged, looking up at Richie a bit sheepishly. “I just don’t usually drink, that’s all. I probably haven’t been to a real bar since I turned twenty-one.”

“What?!” Richie exclaimed, exaggerating his shock and horror. “What else is there to do in this city besides party? Were you an alcoholic or something?”

Tact was never his strong suit.

“*God*, no! I’m trying to take *care* of my liver, that’s the whole point!” Eddie retorted, rolling his eyes. “Drinking too much is the leading cause of liver disease. My mom warned me all about the dangers of alcohol abuse before I went to college.”

Richie laughed. “Of course your fucking *mom* is going to tell you not to drink! It takes way more than a few years at college to fuck up your liver, unless you’re going at it really hard.”

“*Actually*, everyone’s body reacts differently and some people are more susceptible to it. I know for a fact that I’m predisposed to having my organs adversely affected by environmental factors.”

“What, did your mom tell you that, too?” Richie asked, snorting.

Eddie glared at him, a flush creeping into his cheeks. “Yeah, so?”

“She’s bullshitting you, my friend.”

“Well, the couple of times I did get drunk in college, I woke up the next day feeling fatigued and nauseous, *and* my skin looked more yellow, and jaundice is a major symptom, so-”

“Yeah that’s called being hungover!” Richie couldn’t help but laugh again. “And the ‘jaundice’ was in your head. You don’t look yellow to me.”

“Of course I don’t *anymore*, this was like... six years ago or something.”

“Alright, well, at any rate, your mom was still bullshitting you. No one’s gonna *die* from a few drinks.”

Eddie’s eyebrows shot up, eyes wide, and he began to talk very fast. “People die from drinking *all the time!* Even if you don’t fuck up your liver, you can die from alcohol poisoning in *one night*, or get into a drunk driving accident, or drown in your own *vomit*, or fall down the stairs and break your neck, or end up with an *STD* the next day, or-”

“Jesus Christ, lighten up!” Richie said, holding his free hand up in surrender and grinning at how flustered Eddie looked. *Cute.* “So what the hell are you doing here, then? Lookin’ to die tonight?”

“No, of course not. I wasn’t planning on drinking at all,” he replied, reddening again as he looked at the glass in his hand. “But one drink isn’t enough to do any real damage.”

“Unless someone roofied it.”

Eddie’s eyes shot up, mouth agape, and then he looked back down at his drink - now nearly finished - with a look of pure horror on his face. *Jesus, fuck,* Richie thought to himself. *That was probably the creepiest thing I could have said!*

“I’m kidding!” he said, too loudly, and tried to laugh it off.

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

Oh shit, he’s going to leave, I fucked this up already.

“Do you have any idea how *so not funny* that is? You can’t joke about that - fuck, I don’t even *know* you, so maybe you aren’t joking!”

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“I guess I can count on the fact that an actual predator wouldn’t just *admit to it* in public, but seriously, what the *fuck*?”

Tozier, you couldn’t go ten minutes without screwing yourself, huh? Nice

going.

“Sorry, that was way out of line, please don’t leave,” Richie said, and hoped he came across as sincere, which he was. He was hardly ever sincere when he apologized, but he sure was this time. “I... really don’t know why I said that.”

(something about you just makes me want to push your buttons - it’s instinct, baby!)

“Maybe you’re just a douchebag.”

“Yeah, that’s probably it.”

They looked at each other, Richie with a grimace, expecting the worst, and Eddie with a glare. Neither made a move. After a few excruciating moments, Richie tried to turn his grimace into a smile, though he was sure it just came off as a more sheepish grimace.

“Alright, you can stop looking at me like that,” Eddie finally relented. “It’s fucking sad, though, that I hardly ever go out and I *still* know that joking about roofies is just about the worst way to pick someone up at a bar.”

Richie wasn’t sure what to say to that, because he was already sure he’d dug a hole he couldn’t hope to crawl out of, but then Eddie smiled - a sly, teasing one that made Richie’s blood rush. *He gets me, he’s not going to run for the hills!*

“You should probably rethink your brand of humor,” he pointed out, and then took a sip of his drink, as if to prove he’d forgiven Richie’s transgression.

Richie chuckled, thinking of his meeting with Karen that afternoon. Grinning, he said, “Would you believe me if I said that wasn’t the first time someone’s said that to me today?”

“At this point I’d be surprised if it *was*.”

Eddie’s eyes were shining mischievously in the dim bar lighting, and Richie suddenly got the feeling that he was in over his head. He was used to getting smacked, or having dates walk out on him, and he

was used to people humoring him until the end of the night, at which point he would go home alone. However, he was most certainly *not* used to meeting someone who could so easily fall in and out of quick banter, and could probably pull the rug out from under him in the blink of an eye. He'd thought he had the upper hand here, what with Eddie being so wide eyed and clearly sheltered, but he was starting to rethink that.

He may have no idea how livers work, but he could run circles around me if he wanted to, Richie thought deliriously, heart quickening as he finished off the rest of his beer in a couple of gulps.

“You want to get some fresh air?” he asked, itching for a cigarette to calm his sudden nerves. Eddie shrugged, and they began to make their way through the crowd, dropping their glasses onto a table as they went.

Once outside, Richie pulled out his pack of Winstons from his pocket and leaned against the cool brick of the bar’s exterior. Eddie was hovering a couple of feet away, arms crossed.

“You mind if I smoke?” Richie asked, and it dawned on him that he almost never asked permission. He never cared enough to bother.

(Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should - ain’t that right...)

Eddie seemed to consider this for a moment, and then relented, moving to stand by the wall with Richie. “I guess not, as long as you don’t blow smoke in my face.”

“Dahling, I wouldn’t *dream* of it,” Richie quipped in an old timey Hollywood accent, and felt, strangely, as if he’d experienced this moment before. He shuddered, and figured he must look weirded out, because his tiny companion *also* looked weirded out.

Laughing with some uncertainty, he slipped a cigarette between his lips. “Just got really bad *déjà vu*. That after happen to you?” he mumbled around the butt.

Eddie was still looking at him like he’d seen a ghost, but nodded after a moment. “Yeah, totally.”

When he went to light his cigarette, Richie realized his hands were shaking. *Jesus, calm down, space case!* Once he was lit up, he inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, letting the instant calming sensation wash over him. After a moment, he exhaled and opened his eyes, confident that - leaning against a wall with a cigarette hanging between his teeth - he had regained whatever level of coolness he managed to establish before.

He regarded Eddie again, taking him in. Now that they were under the city streetlamps, and able to stand a bit further apart in the open air, Richie noticed a few things. First, he noticed the curve of Eddie's lips - the delicate cupid's bow, and their slight downward curve at the corners. His lower lip was a bit more plump than the upper, and he was absentmindedly biting it. Richie found himself wanting to do that, so he forced himself to look elsewhere. So, the second thing he noticed was that Eddie kept fiddling with the hem of his shirt in a way that suggested more than simply not knowing what to do with his hands in this moment. Richie suspected, based on his furrowed brow and downcast eyes, that this was a habit, not momentary awkwardness. Finally, he noticed that Eddie was wearing a ring on his pinky finger, which Richie found odd. It wasn't flashy, just a simple band - gold, maybe, it was hard to tell in this lighting.

"You seeing someone who doesn't know how ring sizing works?" he heard himself ask before he could rightfully stop himself.

Eddie's hands stopped fidgeting then, which forced Richie to look up. He realized that he'd hardly even been smoking, he was just letting his cigarette hang between his teeth and slowly burn out. He quickly took a drag and then removed it to tap the ashes off.

Eddie was watching him with a look of confusion. "What?"

"Your ring," Richie said, letting out a small cough and nodding in Eddie's direction. "It's on the wrong finger, isn't it?"

Eddie looked momentarily confused before looking down at his hand. "Oh. I forget about this sometimes," he said, and let out an awkward laugh that Richie found adorable. "I've had this for longer than I can remember. I just... wear it, I guess? I haven't thought about it much, honestly." He suddenly looked up at Richie, doe eyed and earnest.

Richie felt light headed. “Why, is it weird?”

“No! I mean. Yes, it’s kind of weird,” he said, and took another drag. “Weird in a cute way, though.”

“Oh.” A flush crept over Eddie’s cheeks, and Richie’s stomach twisted uncomfortably. *Yeah, cute. Cute.*

Eddie broke eye contact with him and glanced over at the other small group of people taking a smoke break. When he looked at Richie again, his expression was strained. “You know there are seven thousand chemicals being released from your cigarette right now?” he said to Richie, speaking very fast and in a tone that implied Richie should already be aware of this information. “Some of which are known to cause cancer even for people who are innocent bystanders. Studies have shown that it’s not even the smoke you’re exhaling that’s most harmful - because your body is sucking up all the cancer causing shit in *that* smoke - it’s the smoke that’s just coming off when you let the cigarette burn out like that, that could be doing the most damage to me, like as we speak I could be developing cancer. Just letting you know that.”

Holding his cigarette in one hand, Richie braced himself against the wall with the other and let out one of the heartier laughs he’d had in a good while. Unfortunately, it turned into a coughing fit halfway through, as it’s never a good idea to mix deep laughter with smoke. When he recovered, he wiped the tears from his eyes and said, “You’ve - you’ve gotta be kidding me, right? You’re getting fucking cancer *right now*, as we speak? *Right now.*”

“I could be! So could *you*, if you don’t have it already.”

“Alright, princess. I’ll put it out. But if I may, you *said* you didn’t mind.”

“I *don’t* mind!”

“Sure sounds like you do.”

“Well - you were being weird!” His cheeks were very pink now, and his body language could only be described as flustered. He looked so

tiny. Richie laughed again. “About my ring.”

“So you... decided to berate me with medical facts?”

Eddie frowned and threw his hands up dramatically. “I wasn’t *berating*, I was just *telling you*.”

Richie didn’t reply, he just smiled. Eddie seemed confused by this, but didn’t say anything either. They simply stood there, and Richie’s gut twisted again as a peculiar thought came to him: this was *easy*. He didn’t know why, and knew if he let himself think about it too much he was sure to run away from this, but he couldn’t remember the last time he had such a quick, authentic *connection* with another person - with someone as weird as he was.

It was settled, then: the night needed to be dragged out. There was simply no other option in Richie’s mind.

He dropped his butt and crushed it beneath his shoe. “Want to take a walk?” he asked, jerking his head toward the road, away from the bar and the increasing number of people loitering outside.

To his surprise, Eddie took a step back. “I should probably head out, actually,” he said, and Richie wondered if that was true, or if he had overstepped a boundary somehow. “Uh. Sorry.”

“Why? It’s early still!” Richie said, perhaps with too much desperation, and took a couple of steps toward Eddie. He wasn’t particularly interested in chasing him down like this every twenty minutes, but he would if it came to that. “You can’t just throw all that heavy shit about cancer on me and *walk away!* I need support in my time of need!”

Eddie laughed and rolled his eyes, but he stopped moving backward - for now. “I have to go all the way back to Queens.”

“So? You can get a cab whenever.” *Or not, maybe?*

“My mom will get worried, I -”

“Wait!!” Richie shouted, briefly drawing the attention of some of the other outside patrons.

Eddie paused, mouth agape. “What?”

“I just thought of a really important question to ask you,” Richie said, his tone overly serious. Eddie looked at him, concerned, and nodded. “How old are you again?”

“I’ll be twenty seven in November...?”

“Oh, *weird*, because I could’ve *sworn* you just said ‘my mom will get worried’ as if you live with her, are fifteen years old, and have some kind of curfew to beat.”

Eddie scowled, and Richie grinned. At first, Eddie didn’t say anything, but his flushed face spoke volumes. This gave Richie a moment to appreciate his side swept hair, longer on top and styled perfectly - not at all the shaggy mess Richie rolled out of bed with and rocked throughout the day. Richie wasn’t sure whether he wanted to run his hands through it or give the guy a noogie, but either way the goal would be to mess it up a bit. He swallowed hard, and took out another cigarette.

“So what if I live with my mom? Lots of people do,” Eddie finally said, clearly on the defense now.

“Yeah, but you’re an *adult*,” Richie mumbled around the cigarette hanging from his mouth just before lighting up again. “So it doesn’t matter what time you get home.”

Eddie shifted uncomfortably when Richie exhaled, and he waved the smoke away from his face irritably. He continued to glare at Richie, seemingly processing what he’d said. In his gut, for whatever reason, Richie knew he would give in. The night wasn’t over yet.

“Well... even so, what if I’m just trying to get away from you?”

“*What?*” Richie gasped, putting a hand to his chest and clutching his t-shirt. “After I saved you from some goon, bought you a drink, and lightheartedly made fun of you? All while thinking about how cute you are? I’m *wounded*.”

Eddie was back to fussing with the hem of his shirt, and also back to regarding Richie with suspicion. “...You really think I’m cute? Not...

not just ‘in a weird way?’”

“Well, yeah. I thought so right away when I saw you inside,” Richie said, trying to sound nonchalant despite feeling oddly vulnerable. He felt his face heat up when Eddie’s expression softened, a smile playing on his lips.

(I saw what a cutie you were the first time I met you)

“Alright fine. I’ll walk with you.”

Richie pivoted on his heels and began walking to the right, toward 1st Avenue. Eddie walked briskly to catch up, but was quick to match Richie’s pace. They walked in silence at first, and Richie wished he had the guts to make some kind of move. Hand holding was out of the question - they’d just met, after all. Would Eddie duck away if he threw an arm around his shoulders? Probably.

“You know... my mom isn’t even going to know that I’m out late. She’s not actually home this weekend, she’s visiting my aunt,” Eddie said after a minute. His arms were folded across his chest, though a mid-June evening in New York could hardly be considered cold.

“So you *were* trying to get away from me.”

Eddie shook his head. “No, not exactly. I just don’t go out very often. This was the first time I tried going to a... you know, a gay bar.”

“You said you’re from Queens?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you come all the way to a dump like the Boiler Room? I’m not complaining or anything, but there are gay bars out in Queens too,” Richie said, and took a drag from the cigarette he’d been nursing.

“Oh.” Eddie’s face fell, and Richie turned away to blow smoke in the opposite direction - out of courtesy. “I kind of - um - honestly? I can’t really go out anywhere nearby just in case like... someone who knows my mom sees me. They could report back to her. She’s really... not cool about this stuff.”

“So? Fuck ‘er.”

“So, I’m living with her right now, as you were so *kindly* making fun of before,” he said, cheeks reddening again. “I can’t really afford to have her hate me.”

“She’d have that much of an issue with it?” Richie asked, his tone more serious now. He thought of his own parents - he’d come out to his mom as bisexual after moving to New York, and she wasn’t exactly surprised, but didn’t press for details and never brought it up again. He’d never told his dad, not out of fear or anything like that, but they weren’t very close and his dad was much more concerned about how Richie made a living than the type of people he slept with. He couldn’t imagine his parents caring enough to react very strongly one way or the other, and he supposed in a way he should be grateful for that.

Eddie moved his hands to his pockets. “Yeah, she would. She... she’s always made it clear that she doesn’t approve of gay people. I guess I used to be kind of, I don’t know, what could be considered *feminine*, as a kid - or at least, that’s what kids at school always said. I think she heard things, or suspected herself, because she was especially mean when she complained about gay guys like... holding hands on a street and stuff,” he said quietly, looking at the ground in front of him. “I think I may have confronted her about it once... I honestly don’t remember. I kind of have a shitty memory.”

“I feel that, I can’t remember *shit* and my agent wants me to ‘draw from childhood’ for my future routines.” Richie rolled his eyes and flicked his cigarette. “Guess I’ll just start making shit up.”

“You have an agent?” Eddie asked, sounding surprised, and Richie wasn’t sure if he was genuinely interested or if he was trying to change the subject. He took the bait regardless.

Richie tossed the butt of his cigarette into the street, landing it neatly in a puddle, and looked at his companion. “I’m a comedian. Not a very successful one, though. And that ain’t just me being humble.”

“So when you said that I wasn’t the first person today to tell you to rethink your humor...”

“Yeah, Karen - that’s my agent - she told me today that some of my impressions are racist.”

“Well, are they?”

“If she says so.”

“What sort of impressions do you do?”

Richie coughed into his sleeve, partly to dislodge some phlegm and partly to hide the color in his cheeks. “Uh, well... see, my whole schtick is doing these Voices, you see? Like, an Irish cop, a British butler... and, you know, an Indian cab driver, a Chinese guy, a uh, S-Southern Baptist, and uhh a Jim Crow era... black guy?” he finished quietly and sheepishly, wilting under Eddie’s horrified expression. If the roofie joke didn’t send him running for the hills, this revelation surely would.

“Jesus *Christ!*”

“But I’m rethinking those ones!” Richie added quickly, putting his hands up placatingly. “I don’t really do the Jim Crow one anymore. I got booed for that one back in Boston when I did a set in Harvard Square, and got the shit kicked outta me. I guess outside of the bumfuck area I grew up in, people don’t think that shit’s funny.”

“I can’t imagine anyone *ever* thought it was funny.”

“Uhh, yeah, maybe not.” Richie thought about this for a moment - *was* he ever funny? “My point is that I learned my lesson. People are more receptive to the other ones, but I’ll drop those too if that’s what Karen thinks will help me get on SNL.”

Eddie snorted. “SNL? Good luck with that.”

“Hey, don’t rub salt in it, kid. Today was the fourth time they rejected my reel. I’m nursing the wound still.”

He shot Eddie a lopsided grin, and Eddie smiled back.

They’d been walking for a good ten minutes when they came upon a twenty-four hour grocery store Richie had stopped in for a late night

snack before. The place sold beer, as he recalled, and he put a hand on Eddie's shoulder to stop him. They grabbed a six pack - Coors Light, not ideal, but Richie knew not to be picky about the selection in a small corner store that was primarily a deli - and then headed south on Essex St.

Richie looped his arm through the plastic grocery bag's handle and took out his pack of Winstons again. This time he didn't take out a cigarette, though. Instead, he withdrew a joint he had tucked away for just this kind of moment - one in which he was wandering aimlessly in the middle of the night with someone he could see himself wanting to call the next day.

"Want to partake?" he asked, holding up the joint.

"No thanks, I have asthma."

"So?"

"So, smoking will exacerbate it."

"It's not a cigarette, though."

"I can fucking see that. It's still smoking," Eddie shot back, rolling his eyes. "And anyway, it's illegal."

"Okay, but who's going to stop us? Any cop will think it's a cigarette from far away and it'll only take us like two minutes to get through it," Richie said. He looked down at the joint, racking his brain for some tidbit of information that might convince Eddie to lighten up a little. "You know... marijuana is anti-inflammatory."

"So?"

"So," Richie replied, exaggerating the word the same way Eddie had moments before. "Isn't the whole deal with asthma inflammation? That's why it's hard to breathe?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well, then marijuana won't exacerbate it, it might even *help*."

“That sounds fake.”

“Ay mon, jus’ give it a try,” Richie said, putting on a Jamaican accent. “You be findin’ dat it make you feel good, mon. Ya lungs won’ be any worse for da wear, an’ if ya got an inhaler on ya den da problem be solved, ya?”

“Fuck, that was just *terrible*.”

“I’ll stop if ya partake, mon. I promise you dat,” Richie said, grinning. He spun around to walk backwards, waving the joint in Eddie’s face. “You sure you wanna say no to dis quality bud?”

Eddie glared at him and for a moment Richie thought he would smack the joint right out of his hand, which would have been a terrible loss. Instead, he shrugged. “Alright, fine.”

Richie grinned and turned back around to walk next to Eddie. “Sweet.”

“I’ll have you know that was coercion.”

“*Coercion*?! I’m hurt.”

“You peer pressured me and then used that horrible, offensive accent to force my hand -”

“Fine, whatever. Come on!”

Richie grabbed Eddie by the arm and pulled him into a small enclave between two closed shops. He handed the joint to Eddie and took out his lighter.

“You ever done this?”

“No,” Eddie whispered, but he didn’t sound too sure about it, for whatever reason.

“Just breathe in when I light you up. Hold it, and then exhale slowly. Don’t laugh or talk while you do it, it’ll make you cough.”

Eddie nodded and placed the joint between his lips. Richie stepped

closer and flicked his lighter, their hands close together as Eddie inhaled. His eyes were closed and Richie's heart skipped a beat. They had been standing this close at the bar, but this felt more intimate - they were alone, after all, and doing something illegal. Richie already felt like a dorky teenager multiple times that night, but this moment took the cake - the adrenaline rush of being tucked into a nook and doing something that could get him in trouble was enough on its own, but there was an added layer of corrupting someone with his shitty habits that gave him *déjà vu* again.

However, maybe *corruption* wasn't the right word. Eddie took his drag like a natural, and when he opened his eyes as he exhaled, Richie's blood rushed. It was seductive. Whether it was intentional or not, Richie couldn't say, but he got the feeling he wasn't corrupting anything tonight. His hands were shaking again when he took the joint from Eddie and he couldn't get back out onto the sidewalk fast enough, flustered as he was.

They walked, passing the joint back and forth until it was dead and the roach was tossed into the street. Once they came upon Seward Park, Richie shifted the grocery bag to his other arm and held out his elbow very properly. Eddie laughed - Richie might have gone so far as to say he *giggled* - and took it with grace, letting Richie lead him into the park. It was silly to act as though they were strolling through like they were straight out of the 1950's; the only people in the park at this hour were druggies and prostitutes, which really broke the illusion, but Richie was mildly intoxicated and wanted to be a gentleman.

Luckily, the sketchy people were few and far between tonight, and Richie was able to stake out a secluded bench a good distance from the street. He dropped the grocery bag and grabbed a bottle, twisting the cap off before handing it to Eddie and doing the same for himself.

"Wait - we can't," Eddie protested, but he was smiling and his eyes had that mischievous glint in them again. "Drinking outside in public is illegal!"

"We aren't in public, look around," Richie said, holding his arms out to showcase how alone they were. "Who's gonna know?"

“There could be park security -”

“If anyone comes along we’ll run. Don’t worry, I’ll save you.”

Eddie laughed and took a swig of his beer, which let Richie know he’d won. They sat down, the six pack on the ground between them. Richie slung his arm across the back of the bench, behind Eddie but not quite touching him. If the moment called for it, he could easily make that move, but he wasn’t feeling confident enough quite yet.

As they drank their first beer, Richie learned that Eddie had lived in Queens for nearly ten years, aside from a semester he spent in the city during college. He lived on campus but got overwhelmed and moved back home, dropping out of school - Fordham - soon after. He finished his degree at a state school he could commute to from home, and then lived with a roommate for a year before moving back in with his mom at the age of twenty-five. Richie thought it sounded like Eddie’s mom had too strong a hold on him, but he wasn’t about to press for details from someone he’d only just met. Family issues were a touchy subject for most people.

When they opened their second beers, Richie chugged the first half and laughed as Eddie struggled to follow suit. At this point, the pot had fully kicked in and he was feeling warm again, after having sobered up a bit during their walk. He regaled Eddie with the complete story of how he got beaten up in Boston, and talked about his college transformation from total nerd to the guy people went to for good weed. He then asked Eddie what he did for a living, and learned that he recently got a job as a driver for a limo company.

“Wow, sounds exciting,” Richie said sarcastically.

“It can be!” Eddie replied earnestly. At some point, he had moved closer to Richie, so their knees were practically touching and he was near enough for Richie to start absentmindedly touching his hair. Eddie didn’t seem to mind it. “I like driving - I’m good with directions, always have been. And my boss really likes me, so he gives me a lot of good jobs - like driving celebrities around.”

“Oh yeah? Who have you driven?”

“That’s confidential!” Eddie said, suppressing a grin as he took a big swig from his beer.

Richie groaned and tilted his head back. “Aww, come on! You can’t drop a bomb like that with no follow through!” he whined loudly.

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Okay... I’ll give you a small sampling. I drove the girls from *Sex and the City* around a few times, they were pretty nice.”

Richie nodded, sipping his beer. “Something juicier than that, please.”

“Uhh, well I drove Jim Carrey a few months back. He was filming a new movie here and out on Long Island. It’s with Kate Winslet... but I didn’t ever get to meet *her*,” Eddie continued, looking a little disappointed by this. “He was nice, though.”

“Come on, you got anyone who *wasn’t* nice?”

Eddie sipped his beer, looking deep in thought. Richie started touching his hair with more confidence, feeling tipsy again along with being somewhat high. “Okay,” Eddie finally said. “Uh, I drove Julia Roberts once and she seemed pretty arrogant. I don’t know, Rich, they don’t really talk to me a whole lot, they just tell me where I need to go. It’s a glorified taxi service.”

“That’s boring.”

Eddie shrugged. “Maybe. But it’s still pretty interesting just to meet famous people, and sometimes I can get their autograph and a pretty big tip. I drove Jon Stewart to an event last year and -”

“Hold up!” Richie shouted, leaping off the bench and spilling his beer a little. He chugged the rest, and then dropped the bottle back into the grocery bag. “You met *Jon Stewart*, host of the Daily Show With *Jon Stewart* - *that Jon Stewart*?”

“Yes. He gave me his autograph and was really cool!”

“Yowza!” Richie dropped to his knees in front of Eddie and grabbed his free hand. “*Please* take me limo driving with you, I’ll do

anything!"

Eddie giggled, and Richie could tell he was kind of drunk now. He was small and allegedly hardly ever drank - three drinks and half a joint was probably a lot for him. "That would definitely be against the rules!"

"So break the rules!" Richie said, jumping to his feet. "If I met Jon Stewart, I'd die - boy I'd just lay down and die!"

He took out another cigarette and lit up, stepping up onto the bench and then onto the low stone wall behind it, grabbing another beer as he went. "That's my dream job - I mean it's my *dream* job!" He stuck the cigarette between his teeth so he could twist the cap off his beer. "Y'know - if I met him I could get his opinion on my Voices. Now *that's* a guy I could take seriously."

Eddie twisted around in his seat, looking up at Richie with a grin on his face. "He'd probably tell you they were terrible."

"And I'd believe him!"

"I thought you wanted to be on SNL?" Eddie asked as he finished off his beer.

"Aw that's just a stepping stone! You know, I used to want to be a ventriloquist - I wanted to be one of the greats," Richie began to pace along the stone wall, gesturing dramatically with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "But I couldn't throw my voice for shit, so I stuck with impressions. Impressions and sketch comedy, that was where it was at a few years ago I swear! But times, they are a'changing, and it's all about politics and satire now. That's why I'm stuck doing shit gigs in shit bars for shit pay - I haven't *advanced* yet!"

Eddie was fully turned around now, sitting on his knees with his elbows propped on the stone wall. Richie met his eyes and felt his heartbeat quicken - he couldn't quite place the expression on Eddie's face, but he knew he wanted it to stay there. His eyes were shining in the dim lighting of the park, grinning like he genuinely wanted to hear what Richie had to say. He rarely had such a captive audience,

and it made him feel both nervous and exhilarated.

(I'm gonna be even greater than Edgar Bergen, you'll see)

He took another drag. “But if - if I get on SNL, I can get the sketch comedy out of my system and start to learn satire at the same time. That’s all Comedy Central is anyway - from South Park to SNL to Jon Stewart, it’s all about *satire*. SNL isn’t the endgame, Eddie, it’s a jumping off point,” he rambled, knowing he was getting loud. He didn’t feel particularly drunk, but he definitely felt *high* - but not necessarily from the weed.

“A jumping off point?” Eddie asked, grabbing the final beer from the six pack.

“Well sure! From there I could get some writing credits, make some appearances on shows outside of SNL - ‘cause all the *great* comedians start out on variety shows, but don’t *stay there*, y’know - and eventually I’d land a job on The Daily Show, or something like it. I’d start out as a recurring correspondant like - like Colbert and Carrell - they’re going places you know, *really* going places.” He took a long drag from his cigarette and continued to pace the wall. “Then I’d get my *own* show. That’s the endgame - talking to famous people, roasting them a little, having live music, doing sketches, getting *recognition*.”

“It’ll happen.”

Richie stopped and looked down at Eddie, who was in the middle of sipping his beer. “What?”

“I mean, I think it’ll happen for you. You have the drive for it, and, you know, *charisma*,” Eddie said, waving a hand in Richie’s direction.

“You think so? You just met me,” Richie said, feeling suddenly shy.

“Well -”

“HEY!” They both turned to see a security guard - or maybe an actual cop - walking toward them. “You can’t have open bottles in the park!”

“Oh shit!” Richie shouted, leaping off the rock wall. He crushed his cigarette under his shoe and saw that Eddie was hurriedly shoving their empty bottles into the grocery bag. Richie looked at the officer, who was still a few yards away. “Aye laddie we were just about ta’ leave don’cha worry! Ya’d do better ta focus on the whores n’ tweekers than us I t’ink.”

“Why you -”

Richie pivoted and grabbed Eddie by the hand, immediately bursting into a sprint with Eddie by his side. They ran, dumping their trash - including their half-empty beers - into the first garbage can they passed, and didn’t stop until they were on the other side of the park, behind the library.

Breathless and cursing his smoker’s lungs, Richie doubled over and spit on the pavement, holding onto his thighs for support. Eddie was laughing harder than he had all night, and Richie could have sworn he’d heard such a lovely sound before - but he couldn’t have, because it was something he would have wanted to recreate over and over again. He’d remember it.

(you had any good chucks today?)

He looked up, still panting. Eddie’s face was flushed, his hair windswept, and he had a wild look in his eyes.

“I have to tell you,” Eddie said, still laughing breathlessly. “I haven’t had this much fun in *years*. Maybe ever.”

Richie straightened up and stumbled toward him, thinking that outside of this moment, he’d never seen anything more beautiful, or fallen in love so quickly. “You almost just got arrested,” he said, still trying to catch his breath. “That’s fun for you?”

“God, I know, that’s the best part!” Eddie laughed. “Although I doubt he would have arrested us. A ticket, maybe. But more likely he would have just kicked us out.”

“Yeah, probably,” Richie said, laughing a little too. His heart was pounding, and not entirely due to the running. “Hey... what were you

gonna say, before he showed up?"

Eddie's face fell slightly, and he looked almost bashful. "Oh, it was dumb."

"What was it?"

"It was..." He groaned, hiding his face behind his hands for a moment before peering up at Richie. "You said that I just met you and... well, I was going to say that it *feels* like I've known you for a long time. That sounds creepy, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't," Richie said, his voice low. He moved again, closing the gap between them. "I... I'm really glad you decided to stay and hang out with me."

"I don't know what it was, something just told me I couldn't leave," Eddie said, bringing a hand up to tentatively touch Richie's shoulder.

"Funny, I felt like something made me step in when that guy was bugging you. Once I saw you I felt..." he trailed off, not sure how to put it into words. He felt a connection, sure, but it was more than that - it was protective, it was possessive, and it was... *inevitable*. Cosmic.

He felt lightheaded, and Eddie was looking at him expectantly. Clearing his throat, he awkwardly continued, "Whatever it was, I'm grateful for it. I, uh... I never really meet people who're willing to put up with my shit."

"Can't imagine why."

"I'm serious. I'm kind of a piece of shit, you know. I'm *annoying*. My jokes are shitty and so are my Voices, and I say things that piss people off without meaning to. Whenever I meet someone cute, I usually make them hate me, if not by the end of the night, then by the next day... a week, max," Richie said, and felt Eddie's fingers tighten on the fabric of his shirt. "I usually don't care, but I... I really don't want to make you hate me."

Eddie's laughter was soft now, and somehow reassuring. "I don't think I could," he said quietly, and although it was something he

couldn't possibly be sure of after only a couple of hours, he *sounded* sure of it, and Richie believed him.

"I really want to kiss you," he heard himself whisper as he brought his hand up to touch Eddie's face. He'd wanted to all night, but never more than he did in that moment. Eddie's breath hitched, and Richie couldn't remember the last time he'd felt such *want*.

"Okay," he replied, hushed and breathless, eyes fluttering closed.

Richie's heart was pounding so hard he could feel it in his veins. He was taken aback by how nervous he was, as he normally couldn't care less about kissing someone for the first time. It was meaningless fun. But this didn't feel like that, not at all.

He moved his thumb over Eddie's cheek and inhaled sharply before ducking down and lightly pressing their lips together. It began soft and unsure, but the moment Eddie responded to it, Richie lost what little self control he had and deepened it hungrily. He dropped his hands to Eddie's waist and pulled him in, blood rushing when Eddie wrapped his arms around his shoulders.

Their lips moved together like they'd done this a thousand times before - when Eddie teasingly pulled back, Richie followed him with vigor, and when Richie ran his tongue along Eddie's bottom lip, he gasped and readily opened up for him. Eddie's hands threaded through Richie's hair, and for an insane, fleeting moment, Richie expected his glasses to be knocked askew - and then remembered, again, that he wasn't wearing them.

He finally broke away to catch his breath, but stayed close, moving his hand back to Eddie's face to keep his chin tilted up - Richie wanted easy access when he was ready to dive back in. Eddie surged up onto his toes to press their foreheads together, and they both laughed breathlessly, shaken by the electricity between them.

"How about that, Eds?" Richie asked, voice shaking in spite of the joking nature of his question. Then suddenly, just as he was about to go in for another kiss, he was shoved - *hard* - and he staggered backward a few steps. "Hey! What -"

The look on Eddie's face promptly cut him off. He looked *horrified*. Scared, like he'd seen a ghost, and confused - angry, even, and... hurt? Richie didn't know what he'd done, but his stomach seemed to drop right into the ground.

"*What did you just call me?*" Eddie gasped out, voice pitched and terrified. He was stark white and starting to breathe abnormally - and not in a sexy way, no, not at all.

Richie was frozen in place, not at all sure what was happening. "I - I don't know?" And he didn't, he couldn't remember - whatever it was, it had just come out, he hadn't thought about it.

(Eds, Eddie Spaghetti, Eds... Eds...)

"You called me Eds."

(I hate it when you call me that)

"Uh. Sorry? Is something wrong?" Richie was getting increasingly uncomfortable and starting to think this guy was crazy after all. Of course he was - he was always too good to be true, right from the start.

(I know)

"Richie Tozier. You grew up in Maine."

Had he told Eddie that? He didn't think so.

"Um. Yeah. How'd you know? You stalking me?" he asked, laughing nervously.

"I know you - I mean I knew you. I - we grew up together, we - we were together," Eddie said, the words jumbled together and broken up by ragged, panicked breathing. Richie reached out to him, but he took a step back. "You were - you left - *you left* - and I - I -"

Eddie's eyes suddenly rolled back and his legs buckled, giving out underneath him. It happened almost as if it were in slow motion, like a movie, as Richie rushed forward, catching him as he fainted.

(but somebody has to toughen you up, Eds)

Shaking and confused, Richie lowered himself to the ground, Eddie limp in his arms, and gently laid the boy down on the grass. He looked around for help, but there wasn't a person in sight, not even the officer from before. "Fuck," he mumbled, and began to reach over to brush Eddie's hair out of his face, unsure of what to do.

Just as he did, though, Eddie gasped violently and sat upright, desperately patting his clothing - searching for something. He pulled an inhaler out of his pocket and barely got it into his mouth before triggering it, gasping between puffs of air. "I'm sorry," he finally said, still wheezing. "That's never happened before. My mom's going to have a conniption when she finds out I fainted."

As Richie watched this, a bright burst of *memory* hit him like a truck. He saw in front of him a boy of six, of ten, of thirteen, of sixteen - all gasping around an aspirator, all worrying about his mother, all looking at him with big brown eyes - eyes he'd been dreaming of and forgetting about for *years* in an endless cycle of sleeping and waking.

Richie Tozier understood now what the expression was on Eddie's face - on *Eddie Kaspbrak's* face - it was recognition. Terrifying, confusing, mind blowing *recognition*.